

Culture

Faberge Masterpiece Given Royal Treatment

By Alexei Moskin

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With Easter just a few days away and the recent discovery of the Third Imperial Easter Egg, thought lost for over 100 years, at a flea market in the U.S., all eyes are on the legendary imperial jeweler Carl Faberge and a new book about decorative art in pre-revolutionary Russia.

The informative guide to Russian artworks and their historical context by art historian Cynthia Coleman Sparke explores Russia through the glittering artifacts of the Tsarist era. Starting from as far back as the 16th and 17th centuries, the book is especially strong on works created in the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, as night fell on the Imperial rule.

Published by Antique Collectors' Club, the guide covers a wide range of crafts from Faberge, jewelry, woodwork, stone, glass and porcelain to precious metals. Sparke, who is a consultant in Russian Art at the Bonhams auction house, explains the art against the fascinating backdrop of Russian history. Each topic is detailed with an illustrated chapter in "Russian Decorative Arts," which introduces the creative technique, its specific Russian characteristics and an overview of the principle makers.

Of them, Faberge, is perhaps the most famous and newsworthy. Hot on the heels of the opening of a museum dedicated to his work by Viktor Vekselberg in St. Petersburg last year, the discovery of the lost Third Imperial Easter Egg means that interest has never been higher in Faberge or the remaining lost eggs.

"Some lucky person is going to pick up a decorative Easter egg at a car boot sale one day and find they have won the arts lottery when it sells for £20 million" said Sparke, whose book will be launched at Bonhams in May.

Each of the 50 eggs Faberge created for the Tsar took one year to complete — from the original conception to delivery on Good Friday each Easter. The recently rediscovered Third Imperial Easter Egg was made by Faberge's chief jeweler August Holmstrom as a gift for Empress Maria Feodorovna in 1887 and was last when it was displayed in an exhibition of the Russian Imperial Family's Faberge collection at the Von Dervis Mansion in St Petersburg in 1902.

Russia's last great Imperial celebration took place at the Winter Palace in St Petersburg with the lavish ball of 1913 celebrating 300 years of Romanov rule. The finest gowns, jewels, snuff boxes and banqueting tableware of the Tsarist era were sumptuously displayed then for the last time.

Ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russians have been eager to repatriate their lost heritage. Works by jewelers and silversmiths to the Tsar and Tsarinas are particularly sought after today as status symbols, with the market for pre-revolutionary decorative arts touching a wide audience - from museum curators to bargain hunters at flea markets.

Other than an appearance in a Parke-Bernet auction catalogue from 1964 where it was sold as a "gold watch in egg form case" for \$2,450, the egg was though lost until purchased for \$14,000 at a second-hand market by an anonymous American dealer in scrap metals. The dealer planned to melt down the egg and remove the jewels but was unable to find a buyer.

London antiques dealer Wartski, which specializes in the work of Faberge, bought the egg on behalf of an undisclosed buyer and will put it on display in a small gallery off London's Bond Street from Apr. 14 to 17. Some estimates put its current value at \$33 million.

The Third Imperial Easter Egg is one of 50 that were made in Faberge's St. Petersburg workshops between 1885 to 1916 for Emperors Alexander III and Nicholas II. Until it was rediscovered, it was one of eight missing eggs. Only two others are thought to have survived the revolution. As the search for the remaining eggs



Wartski, London

A scrap-metal dealer bought the lost Imperial Easter Egg for a mere \$14,000.

continues, Sparke's book may offer assistance in spotting one of the precious gems in unlikely places.

Sparke's passion for Russian decorative art was born from a family collection of Russian art and she has lived on and off in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

After running the Russian department at the Christie's New York auction house, she worked with the Faberge and imperial porcelain holdings of the Hillwood Museum in Washington D.C., the largest collection of Russian decorative arts outside of Russia. Before joining Bonhams, Sparke worked on a project in St. Petersburg at the Alexander Palace in Tsarskoe Selo, helping with the restoration of Tsar Nicholas II's last residence.

"Russian Decorative Arts" will be published in May and presented at Bonhams.